Study Online with Open Christian University and Earn a State-licensed Qualification from California, USA

What Are the Gnostic Gospels?

Sixbert SANGWA • August 21, 2024

The term *"Gnostic gospels"* refers to a collection of ancient religious texts that were discovered in the mid-20th century near Nag Hammadi, Egypt. These texts, written in Coptic and dating back to the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D., are associated with a religious movement known as Gnosticism. Gnosticism was a diverse and influential belief system in the early centuries of Christianity, characterized by the pursuit of special, esoteric knowledge (*"gnosis"* in Greek) as the path to spiritual enlightenment and salvation. This article will explore what the Gnostic gospels are, how they differ from the canonical gospels of the New Testament, and why they were rejected by the early Christian church.

The Discovery and Content of the Gnostic Gospels

In 1945, a collection of thirteen leather-bound papyrus codices was discovered by a local farmer in Nag Hammadi. These texts became known as the Nag Hammadi library and contain over fifty different writings, including what are now referred to as the Gnostic gospels. Among the most famous of these are the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Philip*, and the *Gospel of Truth*. Unlike the canonical gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, which are included in the New Testament and accepted by mainstream Christianity, the Gnostic gospels present a very different picture of Jesus and His teachings.

The *Gospel of Thomas*, for example, is not a narrative of Jesus's life but rather a collection of 114 sayings attributed to Jesus. Many of these sayings are cryptic and require interpretation to understand, reflecting the Gnostic belief in secret knowledge. The *Gospel of Philip* focuses heavily on sacraments and spiritual symbolism, while the *Gospel of Truth* presents a highly abstract and philosophical view of salvation, emphasizing knowledge over faith.

Gnosticism and Its Distorted Teachings

Gnosticism is a broad and complex movement, but at its core, it teaches that the material world is the creation of a lesser, malevolent deity often referred to as the Demiurge. According to Gnostic belief, the true God is transcendent and unknowable, and human beings contain a divine spark that can only be liberated through special knowledge, or gnosis. This knowledge is often hidden and must be revealed by a spiritual guide or savior figure, such as Jesus, who is seen in Gnostic texts not as a redeemer through His death and resurrection, but as a revealer of hidden truths.

One of the most significant differences between Gnostic and orthodox Christian teachings is the Gnostic view of the material world as inherently evil. In contrast, the Bible teaches that God created the world and saw that it was *"very good"* (Genesis 1:31). The Bible also emphasizes that salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ, who died for our sins and rose again, as stated in Romans 10:9: *"If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."*

The Enemy's Strategy: Distorting the Gospel

The emergence of the Gnostic gospels can be seen as part of a broader strategy by the enemy—Satan—to distort the message of the Gospel and lead people away from the truth. From the very beginning, Satan has sought to undermine God's word, as evidenced in the Garden of Eden when he deceived Eve by twisting God's command (Genesis 3:1-5). The Gnostic gospels, with their emphasis on secret knowledge and their rejection of the core tenets of Christianity, can be viewed as a continuation of this strategy. By presenting a different Jesus, a different way of salvation, and a different understanding of God, the Gnostic texts aim to sow confusion and lead believers astray.

Jesus Himself warned of false prophets and teachers who would arise and lead many people away from the truth. In Matthew 24:24, He said, *"For false messiahs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders to lead astray, if possible, even the elect."* The Gnostic gospels can be seen as part of this deception—texts that, while claiming to offer deeper spiritual insight, actually lead people away from the true knowledge of God as revealed in the canonical Scriptures.

Who Wrote the Gnostic Gospels?

The authorship of the Gnostic gospels is shrouded in mystery, but it is widely believed that they were written by members of early Gnostic communities who sought to promote their own theological views. These communities existed on the fringes of early Christianity and were often at odds with the teachings of the apostles and the broader Christian church. Some scholars have suggested that these writings were not simply the product of isolated individuals but may have been influenced or even commissioned by secret societies or groups with agendas that were hostile to orthodox Christianity.

Given the secretive nature of Gnosticism, it is plausible that some of these texts were produced by individuals or groups who were deliberately seeking to undermine the apostolic teachings of the early church. Such groups might have included esoteric sects or mystery religions that were prevalent in the ancient world, many of which blended elements of various religious traditions, including Christianity, into their own syncretic systems of belief. It is not unreasonable to speculate that certain secret societies, with a vested interest in challenging the authority of the emerging Christian church, might have played a role in the creation and dissemination of these texts.

The Gnostic emphasis on hidden knowledge and secret teachings is reminiscent of the practices of many secret societies throughout history, which have often claimed to possess special wisdom that is not available to the uninitiated. This parallels the Gnostic claim that true salvation comes not through the public and accessible message of the Gospel, but through esoteric knowledge that is revealed only to a select few. Such ideas are antithetical to the Christian faith, which teaches that the message of salvation is available to all who believe (John 3:16).

Why Were the Gnostic Gospels Rejected?

The early Christian church rejected the Gnostic gospels for several reasons. First and foremost, they were seen as heretical because they contradicted the teachings of the apostles and the orthodox understanding of Jesus Christ and His mission. The Gnostic texts often depict a different Jesus—one who is more of a mystical teacher than the incarnate Son of God who died for the sins of humanity. For example, the Gnostic view downplays the significance of Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection, central events in the Christian faith, as outlined in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4: *"For I passed on to you as most important what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures."*

Furthermore, the Gnostic gospels were not widely recognized or used in the early Christian communities. The canon of the New Testament, as we know it today, was formed based on texts that were widely accepted by the early church as divinely inspired and apostolic in origin. The Gnostic writings did not meet these criteria and were therefore excluded.

The Influence of Gnosticism on Modern Thought

Despite their rejection by the early church, Gnostic ideas have persisted and even influenced modern religious and philosophical thought. The rediscovery of the Gnostic gospels in the 20th century sparked renewed interest in these ancient texts, leading some to argue that they offer alternative insights into the teachings of Jesus. However, it is important to approach these texts with discernment, recognizing that they represent a worldview fundamentally different from orthodox Christianity.

As Christians, we are called to test the spirits and hold fast to the truth as revealed in Scripture. The apostle Paul warned against being led astray by false teachings, writing in Colossians 2:8, *"Be careful that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit based on human tradition, based on the elements of the world, rather than Christ."* The Gnostic gospels, with their emphasis on secret knowledge and their distortion of key Christian doctrines, can be seen as part of the "empty deceit" that Paul cautioned against.

Conclusion

The Gnostic gospels are a collection of ancient texts that offer a vastly different perspective on Jesus and His teachings from that found in the canonical gospels. Rooted in the belief that secret knowledge is the key to salvation, these writings were rejected by the early Christian church as heretical. The Bible, which is the inspired Word of God, provides all the knowledge we need for salvation and godly living (2 Timothy 3:16-17). While the Gnostic gospels may be of historical interest, they do not align with the truth of the Gospel as revealed in Scripture. As believers, we are encouraged to study the Bible diligently, knowing that *"the truth will set you free"* (John 8:32).

Related Articles

- What Are the Apocryphal Gospels?
- How Have Christians Come to Believe Differently?
- Should Christians Seek After Spiritual Enlightenment?
- Why Should Christians Be Careful About Their Religious Affiliations?
- What Is the True World Hierarchy and How Does It Cooperate for the New World Order?
- What False Doctrine Distinguishes Seventh-day Adventists from Christian Denominations?
- Are Jehovah's Witnesses Saved or Is It Okay to Join Them If You Are a Genuine Christian?

Further Resources

- Explore Online Ministry Opportunities at Open Christian Ministries (USA)
- Explore Christian Business Services at the Center for Faith and Work (Rwanda)
- Pursue an Affordable Online Christian Degree at Open Christian University (USA)
- Kindly Share Your Question for Consideration in Future Articles. Click Here to Submit
- Ask a Question or Utilize Our Trained AI Bot to Craft Your Evangelical Article - Begin Here

← Back to blog

Comments (0)

Post Comment